

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at a Reception Honoring Supreme Court Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor

August 12, 2009

Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the White House. I am glad all of you could be with us today as we honor the newest member of our highest Court, who I'm proud to address, for the very first time, as Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

We are also honored to be joined by Justice Sotomayor's new colleagues. We have Justice Ginsburg who is here, as well as Justice Stevens. And so I just want to thank both Justice Stevens and Justice Ginsburg not only for being here today but for your extraordinary service on the Court. And I know you'll be giving Justice Sotomayor some good tips. [*Laughter*]

I also want to thank everyone who's worked so hard to bring us to this day. I want to thank especially our Judiciary Committee chairman, Senator Patrick Leahy, as well as our Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, for their outstanding work to complete this process before the August recess.

I want to thank Senator Schumer and Senator Gillibrand, both of whom are Justice Sotomayor's home-State Senators, for their extraordinary work on her behalf. I want to thank all the Members of Congress who've taken the time to join us here at the White House event. And I want to acknowledge all the advocates and groups who organized and mobilized and supported these efforts from the very beginning. Your work was absolutely critical to our success, and I appreciate all that you've done. So pat yourselves on the back. Congratulations.

Two Members of Congress that I just especially want to acknowledge: Senator Bob Menendez, who worked so hard on the Senate side, and Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, who is our chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

And I think we all want to take a moment to recognize the woman who, in so many ways, truly made this day possible, Justice Sotomayor's mother, Celina Sotomayor. Mrs. Sotomayor is here with her husband, Omar, and Justice Sotomayor's brother, Juan, and other members of their family. And we're thrilled that they could join us here today. And by the way, I don't normally do this, but let me also just thank my extraordinary White House staff who helped to usher this stuff through. We're very proud of them. Thank you very much.

Of course, we're here not just to celebrate our extraordinary new Supreme Court Justice and all those who've been a part of her journey to this day; we're here, as well, to celebrate an extraordinary moment for our Nation. We celebrate the impact Justice Sotomayor has already had on people across America who have been inspired by her exceptional life story. We celebrate the greatness of a country in which such a story is possible. And we celebrate how, with their overwhelming vote to confirm Justice Sotomayor, the United States Senate, Republicans and Democrats, tore down yet one more barrier and affirmed our belief that in America, the doors of opportunity must be open to all.

And with that vote, the Senate looked beyond the old divisions, and they embraced excellence. They recognized Justice Sotomayor's intellect, her integrity, and her independence of mind, her respect for the proper role of each branch of Government, her fidelity to the law in each case that she hears, and her devotion to protecting our core constitutional rights and liberties.

Justice William Brennan once said that in order for government to ensure those rights for all its citizens, government officials must be attentive to the concrete human realities at stake in the decisions they make. They must understand, as Justice Brennan put it, "the pulse of life beneath the official version of events"—the pulse of life beneath the official version of events.

Justice Sotomayor understands those realities because she's witnessed them firsthand as a prosecutor, a litigator, and a judge, working to uphold our laws, keep our communities safe, and give people the chance to live out their dreams, work that she has done with devotion, with distinction, and with an unyielding commitment to give back to this country that has given her so much. And she understands these things because she's lived these things, because her life is one of those "only in America" stories: raised by a single mom in the south Bronx determined to give her every opportunity to succeed; propelled by the talent and hard work that would earn her scholarships and honors at the best schools in the country; driven always by the belief that it doesn't matter where you come from, or what you look like, or what challenges life throws your way, no dream is beyond reach in the United States of America.

And with her extraordinary breadth and depth of experience, Justice Sotomayor brings to the Court both a mastery of the letter of the law and an understanding of how the law actually unfolds in our daily lives, its impact on how we work and worship and raise our families, on whether we have the opportunities we need to live the lives we imagine.

That understanding is vital for the work of a Supreme Court Justice, as Justice Stevens and Justice Ginsburg will testify, the work of applying principles set forth at our founding to the cases and controversies of our time. For as visionary as our Founders were, they did not presume to know exactly how the times would change, what new questions fate and history would set before us. Instead, they sought to articulate ideals that would be timeless, ideals that would accommodate the ever-changing circumstances of our lives and preserve for each new generation our most sacred rights and freedoms.

And when Justice Sotomayor put her hand on that Bible and took that oath, we took yet another step towards realizing those ideals. We came yet another step closer to the more perfect union that we all seek, because while this is Justice Sotomayor's achievement, the result of her ability and determination, this moment is not just about her. It's about every child who will grow up thinking to him or herself, "If Sonia Sotomayor can make it, then maybe I can too." It's about every mother or father who looks at the sacrifices Justice Sotomayor's mother made and the successes she and her brother have had and thinks, "I may not have much in my own life, but if I work hard enough, maybe my kids can have more." It's about everyone in this Nation facing challenges and struggles in their lives who hear Justice Sotomayor's story and thinks to themselves, "If she could overcome so much and go so far, then why can't I?"

Nearly 80 years ago, as the cornerstone was laid for the building that became our Supreme Court, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes declared, "The Republic endures, and this is the symbol of its faith." Justice Sotomayor's rise from humble beginnings to the height of achievement is yet another symbol of that faith—faith that the American Dream still endures; faith that "equal justice under the law" is not just an inscription in marble, but an animating ideal of our democracy; faith that in this great Nation, all things are still possible for all people.

This is a great day for America, and I know that all of us here are proud and honored to have been a part of it. And so with that, I would like to introduce the newest member of the United States Supreme Court, Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:17 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand of New York. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Associate Justice Sotomayor.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Supreme Court :: Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor, reception.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Gillibrand, Kirsten; Ginsburg, Ruth Bader; Leahy, Patrick J.; Lopez, Omar; Menendez, Robert; Reid, Harry; Schumer, Charles E.; Sotomayor, Celina; Sotomayor, Juan; Sotomayor, Sonia; Stevens, John P.; Velazquez, Nydia M.

Subjects: Congress : Bipartisanship; Congress : Senate :: Majority leader; Judiciary : Supreme Court :: Associate Justice.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900641.